Learning to be a psychologist: the construction of identity in an online forum

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Abstract
The paper reports a study that investigated the construction of a common identity in an online Italian forum of psychologists based on asynchronous CMC. Discourse analysis was carried out on 20 discussions, and three Interpretative Repertoires were identified: (i) Professional Boundaries, (ii) disempowered psychology and (iii) psychology and health, which refer to three recurrent modalities of constructing the psychological profession. The study suggests that a framework drawing on social constructionism and Bourdieu’s critical theory can help understand some aspects of identity in, and across, communities of practice. The main conclusion is that analysing critically how identities are constructed in learning environments, virtual or not, allows reconsidering the role of the cultural context in the production of those identities.

Keywords
asynchronous, constructivist, discourse analysis, identity, professional.

Introduction
According to Packer and Goicoechea (2000), theories of learning have been traditionally concerned with epistemology, i.e. how knowledge is constructed and/or transferred, neglecting somehow the issue of ontology, which is, in short, the study of how people change and come to define an identity during their learning experiences. Lipponen (2002) extends the same critic to the field of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning, acknowledging a similar lack of ‘ontological research’ that analyses the construction of persons and identities in virtual learning environments. The so-called ‘socio-cultural approach’ is, however, a significant exception. According to the socio-cultural view, learning is mainly a trajectory in which people move from a peripheral to a more central participation in several, situated and virtual, ‘communities of practices’ (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Job-Sluder & Barab 2004), developing in the process a common identity. The ‘ontology’ underlying such ideas draws mainly on social constructionism, according to which the person and the world are constructed in a dialogic, socially shared process. From such a perspective (Gergen 1993), identity could be better described as a multifaceted and dynamic dimension, which is continuously renegotiated through a culturally and ideologically informed discourse. Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1991) provides an interesting insight into the process of identity construction in his concepts of cultural field, cultural capital and habitus. Such insight is theoretically consistent with the sociocultural ontology, and it can help to complement some of its aspects. According to Bourdieu, cultural fields emerge when society and history are objectified in systems of meaning. Examples of cultural fields are sports, professional communities (lawyers, doctors or, like in our specific case, psychologists) or any other context where values, rules and power relations affect how people think, behave and communicate. We negotiate our position within a cultural field according to the amount

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of cultural capital we can claim, both for ourselves and for the field in relation to other fields. The cultural capital of a field is the result of the conventional value attributed to the objects that constitute it, and it influences all relations and exchanges within the field, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital in the educational field. The habitus is the way the rules and the objects of a field become embodied and unconscious dimensions of the everyday practices. The habitus is not the exact and passive reproduction of a cultural field in one’s behaviour, but is rather the result of an improvised and sometimes unpredictable negotiation, and as such can do justice to the richness and complexity of the human experience and identity. A good example is the ‘artistic habitus’, which is expressed through specific practices, dispositions, languages, etc.

In this paper, it is suggested that Bourdieu’s theory can be particularly useful to study the construction of a common identity in a networked environment. The main assumption is that online contexts are rarely self-contained realities, but always refer to some pre-existing, culturally and historically shared dimension, i.e. they are always part of a cultural field. Therefore, the real challenge is not just to study how a common identity is constructed ‘locally’, through mutual engagement in a specific context of interaction, but also to understand whether, and how, the construction of an identity in a virtual, networked environment relates to the ‘global’ social and historical contexts of life of those who take part in the interaction. Pursuing this challenge, this study focuses on the processes of identity construction and negotiation through discourse in an Italian-speaking online forum of young psychologists, exploring the following questions:

Is the construction of a common identity taking place?

If it does take place, what kind of identity is constructed, and how does it relate to the social and cultural contexts of the life of those involved?

About identity

The focus on identity construction in an online forum owes something to the literature about online identities (Turkle 1995; Donath 1999; Bowker & Tuffin 2002). In particular, to the notion of fluidity and flexibility of the ‘virtual self’, and to the view that CMC sets the conditions for a reflexive, and discursive, exploration of identity issues (Mantovani 1995). However, identity is still a relatively novel topic of research in the field of computer-assisted learning, and more in general, in the area of the learning sciences. There are, of course, exceptions; Jerome Bruner, in The Culture of Education (1996), argued: ‘education must help those growing up in a culture to find an identity within that culture’ (Bruner 1996, p. 38; in Stables 2003). Stables (2003), drawing on Vygostky and Wittgenstein, suggests the importance of the dialogical dimension in the construction of identities within classroom settings, and shares Harré’s view of learning as the undertaking of identity projects (Harré 1983, cited in Stables 2003). Furthermore, the already mentioned sociocultural approach does take the concept of ‘common identity’ into great account.

Moving from this theoretical background, this study shifts from an individual and ‘private’ idea of identity, without denying it, to a communally constructed one, analysing it critically while it unfolds in a distributed and networked environment, mainly through discourse and dialogue. In this shift lies probably the originality of this paper, at least from the perspective of the learning sciences.

The study: introducing OPSonline

OPSonline (Obiettivo Psicologia online: www. OPSonline.it) defines itself as ‘an independent web community of psychology students and professionals’. It was born in May 2001 out of the initiative of a group of psychology graduates in the University of Rome ‘La Sapienza’ to deal with a supposed lack of opportunities and networks within the academic world, and between the academic and the professional one. The first point of the project’s mission statement is:

To provide a meeting place where students, graduates, professionals and general users can establish valuable relations; sharing experiences, information and practices, helping each other in developing as a group and as professionals. (Copyright by OPSonline s.r.l., 2001).

According to the official website, the number of registered members is, to date (March 2006), more than 20 000, with an average daily visit rate of 7 000. Registration is free, and involves providing basic personal information about status, gender, etc. Members of
the ‘community’ interact in a number of asynchronous forums and a chat, and have access to a mutually built knowledge base of articles, academic theses and lecture notes. The forums reflect the composition of the community as well as different academic and professional contexts of provenience. They are:

- Twelve forums about themes of professional and academic development (among them the one object of analysis in this study);
- Eighteen faculty forums (‘local’ forums developed spontaneously in the faculties of psychology of the major Italian universities);
- Four thematic forums (psychotherapies, clinical psychology, occupational psychology, psychology and Internet); and
- Four ‘relationship’ forums (more relaxed and informal).

The original group of founders are still the administrators of the community, and they are supported by approximately 40 moderators, recruited among the members on a voluntary basis.

The method

Discourse analysis’ main assumption is that discourse does not refer to some pre-existing, underlying reality, but it has a constructive power of its own (Potter & Whetherell 1987). This view is also consistent with ideas about the transformative power of language in the development of mental processes (Wertsch 1985, Vygotsky 1986).

The discursive method used in this study draws in large part on critical Discourse Analysis, and in particular on the concept of interpretative repertoire (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984; Potter & Whetherell 1987), which refers to ‘a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events’ (Potter & Whetherell 1987, p. 138). Interpretative repertoires can be considered as organised and relatively coherent ways of talking, constituted by a range of culturally informed linguistic resources that people use in their everyday interactions to do a diversified range of things, including constructing and negotiating their own identity; they are the ‘building blocks of conversation’ (Edley 2001, p. 198). The use of critical discourse analysis, along with Bourdieu’s framework, helps us see the process of identity construction in the online forum not as an exclusively ‘local’ phenomenon, but also as dependent on the speakers’ cultural, ideological and historical contexts of living. As such, it is particularly suited to the research questions explored here.

The sample

The sample is composed by 20 discussions randomly selected from a single forum in OPSonline: ‘About the psychological professions’. The choice is deliberate, because this forum was set up as a space to reflect collaboratively on problematic dimensions related to the condition of the psychological profession in Italy. This procedure has been informed by the concept of theoretical, or purposeful, sampling developed in the context of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Theoretical sampling is a data-driven and ethnographic approach whose purpose is to ‘go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions’ (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 201) The forum comprises 270 discussions, and 3519 messages have been posted from its set-up in October 2004 to the present date (March 2006). The forum is defined as

An open space for a CRITICAL reflection about our professional universe.

The discussions occurred from October 2004 to April 2005, and the average number of posts per discussion is 12.5 (minimum: 5; maximum: 31). Each discussion is about a specific issue, more or less problematic, related to the psychological profession. They can be organised into two broad categories:

1. Explicit requests of help/information regarding alternative practices that could be used by psychologists (homeopathy, hypnology, pet-therapy, etc.) or bureaucratic and tax-related issues for those who are just accessing the profession (total number: 11).
2. Open-ended discussions that explicitly focus on critical aspects of the profession, such as how to promote an adequate and non-superficial image of psychology in the media, or about general
expectations and professional ambitions (with titles like ‘the occupational future of psychologists’, ‘what will you do when you grow up?’) (total number: 9).

Discussions from both categories contributed to the findings. Table 1 provides descriptive information about the discussions (word count and average posting).

A total of 103 posters took part in the discussions: 62 of them were women and 27 were men; in 14 cases, the information about gender was deliberately omitted (this, and the following, information was provided by the profiles of each members, which are public and do not require authorisation from the data owner to be viewed). The majority of the posters, 43, are graduates, 36 are professionals, 16 are undergraduate students and the remaining 8 are generic users. The prevalence of women among posters reflects a typical characteristic of the psychological profession’s demographics in Italy. According to official data from the Italian Professional Body of Psychologists (www.psy.it), nearly 80% of psychology graduates are women.

Analysis and interpretation

The preliminary coding phase consisted in reading the texts looking for patterns of meaning. This led to the identification of some general categories, which have been subsequently strengthened through repeated readings of the materials, looking for specific re-occurring instances (for more detailed information about coding, and identification of interpretative repertoires, in discourse analysis see Wetherell & Potter 1988; Wetherell et al. 2001). The data were coded using the software for the qualitative analysis NVivo, which allowed customised editing operations that effectively contributed to the organisation of the source material. Furthermore, a selection of the discussions was analysed by a second coder, and inter-rater reliability was found to be acceptable.

This procedure led to the identification of three Interpretative Repertoires: professional boundaries, disempowered psychology, and psychology and health. These repertoires refer to three recurrent modalities of constructing the psychological profession and the related professional identity.

Table 2 provides a summary of the repertoires found in the sample, with the number of instances and the number of threads where such instances were identified. In sum, there were 93 examples of these repertoires in 20 discussion threads.

Repertoire 1: professional boundaries

The ‘professional boundaries’ repertoire is particularly relevant within the data and 38 examples were found. As other authors already noted (Bourdieu 1984; Melucci 1988), the construction of a common identity is usually based on a range of discursive/symbolic practices aimed at establishing clear boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’. According to Bourdieu, a professional community can be conceptualised as a cultural field, i.e. a ‘series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitutes an objective hierarchy’ (Webb et al. 2002, p. 21). This hierarchy determines what can be considered as cultural capital within the field, and authorises the production of certain discourses and practices, but not others, leading to the definition of symbolic boundaries. The distribution of cultural capital, in other words, determines what can be legitimately included in the field, and what must be kept outside. A typical example is represented by the value usually attributed to official qualifications, which partly (but not exclusively) allow access to a field and determine the status within it.

Table 2. Summary of the instances for each repertoire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repertoire</th>
<th>Professional boundaries</th>
<th>Psychology disempowered</th>
<th>Psychology and health</th>
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<tr>
<td>Instances</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threads</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
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In this repertoire, the ‘boundaries’ are meant to defend the profession from the alternative practices that thrive in fields adjacent to those ‘traditionally’ psychological, and they are mainly defined and negotiated in terms of legitimacy. We can see in the following examples how the attribution of cultural capital, in terms of statutory regulations and official qualifications, determines how the professional boundaries are defined and how some practices are rejected and others accepted.

Rejection: keep the rubbish outside
Twenty-one instances (out of 38) of this kind were identified in the sample. The following passage is an extract from a discussion started by a member who wants to know more about the legitimate ways through which a psychologist can advertise his/her professional services, in compliance with the strict regulations established by the professional body to protect the clients and the integrity of the professional community. Eleven people took part in the thread, and 28 messages were posted.

After some exchanges, the main theme starts emerging, as the strict rules of the professional body are deemed necessary to draw a clear separation line between a statutory-regulated profession and all the dubious practices more or less related to the psychological field. In the excerpt, one of the moderators explicitly justifies the importance of authorisations from the professional body, quoting what seems on official document or publication to support his position:

Michele (Male – moderator) From my point of view it is better to ask for an authorization, with a professional body that is outspoken against all the rubbish that is sold as ‘psychology’.

Here is an interesting bit from a regional president. Quote:
We will carry on fighting anyway (. . .) but sometimes I have the feeling that I am trying to empty the sea with a tea-spoon, because besides counsellors there are many others who are trying to invade our field. There are the clinical pedagogues, the relational philosophers, the family mediators, the self claimed ‘psychoanalysts’ with secondary school qualifications (if you have time to spare, have a look at Francesco X’s website ‘European Association of Psychoanalysis, that we are trying to stop with some kind of legal action, but without success), psycho-astrologers and so on.

The quote from the regional president of the professional body, an authoritative source, is meant to strengthen the claim that the ‘rubbish that is sold as psychology’ must be rejected by any means. In the quote, the language is even more aggressive and war-like (fighting, invasion), and the importance of the ‘right’ qualifications is explicitly stated. It is worth reporting that this post had an unexpected effect on the discussion: the relative popularity of OPSonline, and the fact that access to the forums is not restricted but open to everyone, allows the person mentioned in the quote to join the thread to express his own views on the matter:

Francesco (Male – professional) Apparently Michele (. . .) lacks the basics as he ignores that the only real training to be psychoanalyst comes from your own personal analysis. It is a path that demands a great investment, both economic AND psychological (. . .). Last but not least, I wish to communicate to Mr Michele that their legal action might actually damage me from a professional point of view, but I am proud to say that the Justice won at last clearing me completely. Therefore, it would be fair if everybody here knew that in Italy the profession of psychoanalyst is not subject to the laws that regulate psychologists and psychotherapists. Bringing to court psychoanalysts who are not aligned is just another form of medieval witch-hunting (. . .).

The first, and perhaps more striking, aspect of the passage is related to the very nature of the online medium, which seems to be perfectly suited to host a problematic discourse about boundaries. In fact, it could be argued that the most characterising dimension of the Internet lies precisely in its ‘borderline’ nature, which allows people from different contexts and fields to ‘connect’ in a sometimes conflictual, sometimes constructive manner. Second, we can see how the newcomer challenges the assumptions of a statutory-regulated profession, denying the legitimising role of official training, and eventually positions himself as the victim of a witch-hunt persecution.

2The ‘quote’ is an extremely common characteristic in asynch. CMC, used to clarify and empower the statements of speakers. It serves an important rhetoric function and therefore it cannot be excluded from discourse analysis.

3All names have been changed, unless nicknames were used.

4Other discussions, which were not included in the sample, presented the same kind of dynamic, where external speakers join the community, bringing directly into the discourse all the problematic consequences of their being ‘foreigners’.
‘us and them’ separation could not be more dramatic, with the newcomer trying to construct psychoanalysis as a cultural field independent from psychology, where the capital is represented by the ‘psychologically and economically expensive’ personal therapy.

Acceptance: you can stay in, as long as you are qualified

Seventeen discursive instances (out of 38) of this kind were identified in the sample. The following passage comes from a discussion about the possibility of using hypnosis for therapeutic means (the discussion title was: ‘hypnotherapy’); three people took part and five messages were posted. The main theme is, again, the role of official qualifications in defining criteria of legitimacy for the psychological field.

Gina (Female – graduate) the specialization school I am enrolled to (AMISI, Associazione Medica Italiana per lo studio dell’ipnosi) loathes the definition ‘Hypnotist’ for a very simple reason: Hypnosis for the sake of itself is more or less useless; such qualification would be just non-sense.

Hypnosis, the right and serious one which is related to our job, must be part of a psychotherapeutic project, and this is the reason why if somebody wants to choose this route he has to do ‘Psychotherapeutic Hypnosis’ without shortcuts. Unfortunately the ‘Hypnosis issue’ in our country is still quite thorny . . . I found out by myself as it was the subject of my dissertation thesis; in fact, if you want to learn how to use hypnosis with your patients always approach qualified people who adhere to Erickson’s theory. Perhaps in the end you won’t be able to put ‘Hypnotist’ on your visiting card but at least you will be able to use a valid instrument . . . . And you can always put it in the CV!!!

In the passage, an external practice is admitted within the professional boundaries, which are re-negotiated to allow its inclusion, provided that it meets some basic criteria of legitimacy within an institutional route, whose authoritativeness is implicitly verified and collectively shared. We can see how hypnosis is first rejected (it is ‘loathed’), and then re-constructed as a legitimate psychological practice through some rhetorical stratagems. The poster mentions a ‘medical association’, perhaps relying implicitly on the unquestioned authoritativeness of doctors. Her advice is to avoid ‘shortcuts’ as ‘the only acceptable form of hypnosis is ‘psychotherapeutic hypnosis’, and to ‘ap-

5Italian Medical Association for Studies in Hypnosis.
its painfully achieved scientific rigour. Here is a good example:

Almaserena (female-graduate) (...) There are so many pseudo-magazines that describe psychology as an everyday thing, taking away all its real scientific value and leading profanes to believe that even your neighbour can give you psychological advice. (..)

Why does this happen only here? In the United States psychologists do everything, have a say during public elections, have a place in court rooms, in schools, they invest in research, the profession there is growing, developing ... why do we just keep talking ... talking . . .

The comparison with the United States tells something about the role of power in the relationship between psychology and society. It is, in fact, likely that the degree of social power, in terms of institutional recognition, authoritativeness and active participation in power-related contexts (like the courtrooms and the public elections mentioned in the excerpt) is an important component of most professional identities. According to Bourdieu (1984), all activities in every sort of context are informed in part by the notion of self-interest and by the will of those involved to enlarge their sphere of influence and increase their status. As a result, the construction of a common professional identity will always involve a commitment, often unconscious, to a systematic bid to gain more power. Within a Bourdiean framework, the comparison with the United States in the above passage can be read as an attempt to increase the value of what constitutes cultural capital in the Italian psychological field, defining a set of ambitions and frustrated expectations that, inevitably, have an effect on the construction of a professional identity. It could be argued that learning how to be a professional in every field always implies dealing with the social appeal, power, status, etc. that can (or could, if things ‘were different’) be offered by that field to its potential members.

Repertoire 3: psychology and health

This repertoire, comprising 18 instances, includes a set of discursive elements used to negotiate another important dimension of the psychological professional identity: its objectives and its ultimate aim. Like the previous repertoires, it can be considered as an attempt by young professionals to define their specific cultural field, determining what constitutes symbolic capital within it. In the professional boundaries repertoire, such capital was determined by the legitimising power of ‘official’ qualifications, whose primary function was to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate professional practices. In this case, the discourse unfolds around an equally fundamental aspect: the values and imperatives that inform and determine those practices. Is psychology a health-related profession? Is the aim of a psychologist to improve people’s health and well-being? Or is the concept of ‘health’ too much medical and reductionist for a discipline as eclectic and complex as psychology? Should health be replaced by a more critical and multidimensional concept, which also includes a more aware and responsible approach to society and to life in general?

The data offered two possible answers to the above questions, each of them with peculiar consequences for how the psychological profession is envisaged.6

Psychology IS a health-related profession.

Ten instances of this kind were identified in the sample. In this view, psychology’s aim is undoubtedly to help improve people’s health conditions. The assumption is somehow implicit from a perspective where psychology is essentially seen as diagnosis and therapy. The most immediate consequence that such a position has on the professional identity is an inevitable complex of inferiority towards the health profession ‘par excellence’: medicine. As a result, doctors become irreplaceable but often arrogant and presumptuous colleagues. The following extract is from a discussion called ‘communicating the profession to society’, a heated exchange about how the psychologists are perceived by society, and the consequences of this perception for the profession; 6 people were involved and 8 messages were posted. One of the posters (a moderator) argues that psychologists depend too much on redirecting procedures

6It should be noted that this problematic aspect of psychology is not an exclusive prerogative of the Italian context. In the United Kingdom, for example, the British Psychological Society has recently (July 2005) rejected, in a public statement, a proposal of statutory regulation by the Health Professions Council (HPC). The official reason was that accepting the proposal would have led to a loss of specificity, among risks of lower standards, for an extremely complex discipline, whose many branches have quite often very little to do with health.
to find clients (i.e. doctors who recommend trusted psychologists to their patients). The reply is

Danielita (female – professional) (…) This is my experience: doctors often do what we should be doing; they don’t value our contribution for diagnostic purposes . . . Furthermore, they can become therapists themselves, and this feeds even more their all-powerful attitude, and reduces drastically our job opportunities (…) The poster, supposedly drawing on her experience, depicts an unfair situation nearly at the limit of abuse: misappropriated competences and scarce recognition are supported and justified by the sense of powerfulness of doctors, who can even have access to an ‘inherently psychological’ field such as psychotherapy.

Here is one more excerpt from a discussion where the problematic relationship with doctors is central, but where another important aspect is also introduced. In this case, the poster, nicknaming him/herself ‘salusmundi’ (‘health of the world’), starts a new discussion about the possible use of homoeopathic treatments in psychology/psychotherapy; 6 people took part in the discussion and 10 messages were posted:

Salusmundi (female – graduate) I would like to know your opinion about the use of homeopathy by psychologists. Why a psychologist (provided he has the right training) cannot use homeopathy like a doctor? (…) I think that there are other valid instruments complementing the word that psychologists could implement to cure a patient . . . . If perhaps we can see the patient in his totality we can work more effectively. (…) Anyway, I would like to note that not just ‘some doctors’ use homeopathy but thousands, millions of users just in Italy. We are talking about doctors who have decided to implement different means to achieve their goal: to cure.

There are two interesting things in this passage. In the first place, psychologists appear to be engaged in an unfair competition with doctors. There is an uneven distribution of ‘instruments’ (psychologists have just ‘the word’), but the ultimate objective is the same: to cure. Secondly, we can see, like in the previous extract about hypnosis, that a reference to the authoritative ness of medicine becomes the sufficient condition to validate a usually controversial professional practice. It appears relatively clear that the conflictuality derived from the concept of cure has some serious consequences in the way the psychological professional identity is constructed and negotiated. Insofar as the aim of the psychologist is ‘curing people’, this inevitably leads to a medical view of the psychological practices. It implies the opportunity to join a culturally dominant system of meaning capable of guaranteeing authoritativeness and solidity (and, in some contexts, official support, institutional funds, etc.), avoiding the risks of inconsistency, vagueness and complexity that psychology sometimes seems to foster.

Psychology is NOT a health-related profession

However, joining this system of meaning ensures at the same time the inevitable loss of specificity of the psychological profession, which is reduced to a sort of dependent and secondary role. This awareness is what drives the opposite discursive position, which strongly rejects the idea that psychology is always bound up with health. The following extracts are from the previously considered discussion about ‘communicating the profession to society’ (six people taking part and eight messages posted); a total of 8 instances of this kind were identified in the sample. Here, a poster argues that the real problem with how psychology is generally perceived is that:

Ulisse (male – professional) Ideas circulating in the institutions (National Health System, University, Society) feed the negative mythology of the profession and support the illusion that the psychologist is someone who diagnoses and cures. (…) A psychologist, as such, thinks and communicates (and he does it in every context). It is normal for doctors to fight those who invade the field that historically belongs to them: clinical anamnesis, symptomatic diagnosis, prognosis and cure. (…) Some psychologists like to venture on such things without knowing bloody nothing about medicine. Like when they were playing to the doctor.

The psychologist depicted in this passage lives under the delusion that she/he can diagnose and cure like a doctor; sometimes the delusion is so strong that some particularly ignorant practitioners believe that they can superficially venture on some areas that historically belong to medicine.

Another reply, from another poster, strengthens the concept:

Ifx (gender undisclosed - graduate) (…) In my opinion a psychologist doesn’t CURE!!! To cure presupposes a sort of recovery and I do not think you can ever use such terms when you talk about psychological matters (…)
In the following passage, always from the same discussion, there is an attempt to define a system of meaning that could be alternative to the health-related one of cure:

Max (Male – graduate) (. . .) To make a stupid example, a broken arm is much simpler to explain than a depression and people are scared by this, they are scared because they are ignorant, preferring a handful of pills prescribed by their GP rather that a commitment lasting months or years aimed at a real improvement.

The poster introduces in the passage the concept of ‘real improvement’. Such a condition, which appears to be a kind of more existential and ‘holistic’ dimension of well-being opposed to the symptomatic and reductive approach of medicine, is achievable only through a ‘commitment lasting months or years’. Such a concept, however, is clearly constructed as weak and difficult to explain to the ‘ignorant’ public. From the excerpt emerges the struggle to define a clear set of specific objectives, a commitment to some kind of beneficial effect that psychology, intended as a professional practice and therefore as a marketable service, is inevitably expected to deliver.

Conclusions and discussion

Throughout the analysis, the insights of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1991) provided a solid and original framework to interpret the findings. Within such a framework, it is possible to assume that the discussions analysed reflect the construction of a professional identity, which takes place through:

- the definition of a specific cultural field, i.e. a series of institutions, values, rituals, titles, objectives, etc. organised in a hierarchic way;
- the determination of what constitutes capital within that field: what is valuable and legitimate and what justifies professional aspirations of social recognition, power and success.

Bourdieu’s critical theory allows to reposition the process of identity construction in its specific context of cultural production. The main implication of adopting a critical framework is the conclusion that the construction of a professional identity, like probably the construction of any kind of identity, is rarely a neat and merely individual process, but it is always informed by the texts and discourses provided by the cultural context. In this specific case, it could be assumed that the way psychology developed as a discipline, and its troubled quest for legitimacy among the human sciences, provide a series of texts that influenced the discourse of our young professionals; the medical ‘ideology of health’, with its language and values (symptoms, diagnosis, cure), provides further texts and discourses. However, the analysis does not show how the social context is eventually renegotiated, mediated and perhaps reconstructed in the actual everyday practices that, according to Bourdieu, would define the ‘Psychological Habitus’. In other words, this study, in order to provide a complete understanding of the psychological professional identity in Italy, should go beyond the boundaries of the virtual community, to analyse critically how the interpretative repertoires that we described become embodied expressions in the everyday practices of the community members. Further studies in this direction are being conducted.

Furthermore, the problematic aspect of the findings also reflects the ‘demographic’ characteristics of the virtual community, whose members are mostly students, graduates and young professionals still struggling to define the very basis of their professional identities in a highly competitive job market. The words of this member adequately summarise the situation:

Since I graduated the road to the profession . . . seemed a sort of treasure hunt without clues . . . I mean, I know I have to go somewhere, but I hardly know where I want to go and I don’t know absolutely how to get there!!!

Linking the findings to current research on online communities of practices

The idea that a socially constructed identity is based on the relationship between the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ derives also from the work of E. Wenger on Communities of Practices. ‘We define who we are by negotiating local ways of belonging to broader constellations and of manifesting broader styles and discourses’ (Wenger 1998, p. 149). This study explores precisely those ‘broader discourses’, and shows that moving from the local to the global implies establishing direct or indirect connections with the
cultural, historical and ideological context. From this perspective, Bourdieu’s critical theory might provide a rich framework to interpret in an antireductionist way the relationship between the local and the global.

Another important aspect of the relationship between the local and the global is linked to the idea of ‘network’. This study tentatively suggests that the networked nature of a virtual community supports the reflective construction of a ‘global’ identity more than just a local one. After all, every virtual community is, primarily, a network, and, as such, it usually provides the perfect means to establish quick, safe and easily negotiable connections between different communities of practices, and between communities and the general cultural and social context. As Lemke (1997) notes, we do not just live and learn in communities and practices, but also across communities of practices, and probably nothing better than a virtual environment can create and support the links to ‘bridge the gaps’. Such links, however, can be problematic: a professional identity, like in the case of our young Italian psychologists, can have some ‘negative’ connotations.

Such considerations also have implications in terms of design of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs), because they suggest that, along technological and ‘micro-interactive’ factors, there is a wider institutional and social context, whose features and criticalities can have dramatic effects on the environment itself, and on its learning outputs. A focus on a communally, and discursively constructed identity, with the help of Bourdieu, is one way to ‘see’ the relationship between the cultural context and the VLE, and it can certainly provide a deeper understanding in the reasons why VLEs fail or succeed. It could be said that a communally constructed identity is the ‘nexus’ where the local and the global factors affecting learning converge.

However, it is difficult to imagine how the construction of a positive common identity in a virtual community could be ‘engineered’ through design choices or other strategies, because too many cultural, social factors are involved. From this perspective, this paper is probably also concerned with the necessity to reconsider critically the culturally and ideologically informed views that underlie learning, professional development, etc., and that influence policies and strategies.

References


